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OPINION

In Kashmir, Nehru's golden chains that he hoped would bind the state to India have lost their lustre

Kashmiris ponder the price they have to pay for economic packages amidst rising discontent over the failure of shutdowns as protest in the wake of another death.

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'Prove we are Bangladeshi': Assam families protest Supreme Court's deportation push



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On November 7, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kashmir and announced a Rs 80,000-crore economic aid package for the region. The same day, amidst a curfew, imposed to pre-empt “disturbances” to the prime ministerial visit, 22-year-old Gowhar Dar was shot dead, hit in the head with a pellet gun fired by a Central Reserve Police Force paramilitary officer.

This is, sadly, nothing new for Kashmir. But there was something about the crude financial transactionalism alongside state-sponsored death that drew the attention of many in Kashmir. As a placard held by protestors put it bluntly: “Gowhar’s killing is Modi’s gift to Kashmir.”

Soon after Partition, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru is said to have told then Prime Minister of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, that India would bind Kashmir in golden chains. Since 1947, economic development programmes have been a central part of the Indian government’s effort to quell unrest in the region. Notwithstanding the efficacy of these projects, the dominant perception across India remains that Kashmir is like a petulant child, ungrateful for the benevolent gifts and privileges the Centre has bestowed upon it.

Benevolence is precisely what Modi was keen to perform on his recent visit, his first since the Bharatiya Janata Party and the People’s Democratic Party formed an alliance in early 2015 to rule the state. The visit offered promises of economic progress and appeals to a shared humanity but was accompanied by – in routine fashion – pre-emptive detentions and arrests of hundreds of political activists as well as a complete shut-down in telecommunications. It is not hard then to understand why Kashmiris baulked at the Rs 80,000-crore package: curfewed in their homes, their mobile phones and internet services blocked, the message was clear. Economic development comes at the cost of political freedom.

As news circulated about Gowhar’s death, one Facebook post drew attention to this perverse form of exchange: “The boy repaid rather in advance, the debt worth 80,000 crore.”

A forced exchange

Framing the economic package both as a double-edged, violent “gift” and a “debt” forcibly repaid, these responses illuminate the deeply asymmetrical relationship between the Indian state and Kashmiris. As the anthropologist Marcel Mauss argued nearly a century ago, there is no such



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topic of increasing concern among Kashmiris. Many have suggested that Kashmir's economic dependence on India is wholly manufactured, mobilised discursively by political pundits to undermine demands for *azaadi* and to argue for the impossibility of an independent, sovereign Kashmir. In the summer of 2014, this issue received renewed attention in a minor but significant debate that took place in Kashmiri newspapers between local scholars and economists about what would need to come first to achieve independence: political or economic sovereignty. Each author pointed to the limits of the other. The rhetoric of economics, one argued, was blinkered to the fundamentally political nature of the self-determination movement, whereas the other suggested that without economic autonomy, Kashmir could never reach a position of political power for negotiating its fate.

Underlying this debate are questions of the possibilities of popular, pro-independence politics in contemporary Kashmir. How do Kashmiris build roads, access electricity, and live their daily lives, while also demanding for an end to draconian emergency laws, and the restoration of their fundamental freedoms. In response to the *hartal*, or strike, called for by separatists the day following Gowhar's death, one protester remarked on the futility of political strikes, and their inability to reckon with the dilemma of equivalence: "Is value [sic] of the young blood worth a one day strike only? Only a common man can understand that these shutdown calls don't affect India, but only our own poor people." At the heart of the protester's remark was a widespread frustration with the diminishing efficacy of the general strike and its adverse impact on local economies, livelihoods, and day-to-day life.

Separatist leaders are well aware of this discontent. Several days ago, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq of the Hurriyat Conference (G) called a meeting among pro-independence groups to discuss alternatives to the general strike. Numerous activists were detained on their way to the meeting – another instance of the clampdown on bodies and mobility that is characteristic of the Indian State. This raises the question: what strategies remain beyond the political strike, economic and political resistance, and an unrelenting compromise with the state?

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